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C O N F I D E N T I A L RIGA 000524

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/05/2016
TAGS: MOPS PREL PGOV IZ LG
SUBJECT: LATVIAN DEFMIN REASSURED ON ROTATAION OF LATVIAN
TROOPS, FOR NOW

REF: BAGHDAD 2319

Classified By: Ambassador Catherine Todd Bailey. Reason: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: As flagged by Embassy Baghdad, the Government of Latvia has been very concerned in recent days about what they believed to be a delay in the return home of their contingent rotating out of service in MNF-I. Thanks to quick coordination, we have been able to allay GOL concerns and the Minister of Defense told the Ambassador July 5 that he accepts that there was miscommunication within the GOL that led to the confusion. Nevertheless, the incident is indicative of the nervousness of senior Latvian political figures regarding Iraq as October's parliamentary elections draw closer. End summary.

¶2. (C) As reported reftel, during Latvian Def Min Slakteris' recent visit to Iraq, the GOL came to believe that the U.S. was delaying the return of Latvian soldiers coming home from Iraq. Post first learned of this July 2 when land forces commander Reyevs approached DATT at 4th of July event to complain. DATT immediately began working with CENTCOM and others to learn the true state of play and we had much of the information in paras 8 and 9 reftel by COB July 3.

¶3. (C) On July 4, both DefMin Slakteris and FM Pabriks called Ambassador Bailey to express their concern about the supposed "delay" in the return of Latvian troops. Ambassador told them that we had other information, but pledged to reconfirm. DATT, thanks to previously received information, was able to quickly reconfirm the state of play with CENTCOM and Ambassador was able to call the two ministers back within 15 minutes to explain that the July 10 - 13 window had been agreed and coordinated with the Latvian rep at CENTCOM.

¶4. (C) In a July 5 meeting with the Ambassador, Slakteris acknowledged that there had been miscommunication within the GOL that had led to the confusion. He first heard of the alleged problem when meeting with Latvian troops and several of them complained, in the presence of Latvian press. Concerned about the potential negative effect of a story saying the U.S. was holding Latvian troops in Iraq beyond their expected departure date, Slakteris and others launched.

¶5. (C) Comment: We believe we have this particular story under control, although it could rise again in the press, especially if the returning troops repeat it. There are two lessons from this episode. First, senior Latvian politicians are nervous that Iraq will explode into the election

campaign. At the moment, it is not a major political issue. Public opinion toward the deployment remains negative, but no more so than it has been in the past year. However, a negative event like casualties or a sense that the Latvian contribution is taken for granted could easily invigorate the opposition to the deployment. That is also why the GOL is so focused on staying in close coordination with us, so it does not look out of touch. The second lesson is the value of the coordination between all concerned. We greatly appreciate Embassy Baghdad's and CENTCOM's timely reporting which kept us on top of the issue and able to quickly address our host government's concerns.

Bailey